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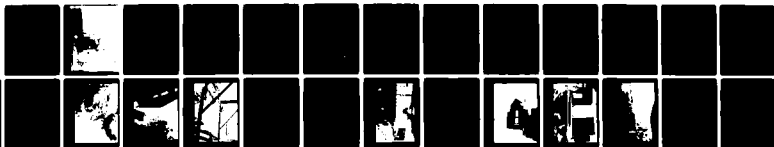
ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL SURVEYS OF WILLOW CREEK
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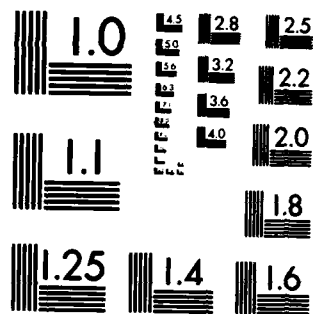
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ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL SURVEYS OF
WILLOW CREEK LAKE, OREGON

Gregory C. Cleveland
and
Robert K. Sutton

Laboratory of Archaeology and History
Washington State University
Pullman
1980

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF WILLOW CREEK LAKE, OREGON

by

Gregory C. Cleveland

On September 3 through 9, 1980, an archaeological survey and test was accomplished by the Laboratory of Archaeology and History within the proposed Willow Creek Dam Reservoir. An historic survey was conducted by Robert Sutton, a WSU historian, in August of 1980. The results of his investigations are presented in the second section of this report.

The archaeological survey was carried out by a team of four archaeologists walking 10 meter spaced linear transects over those portions of the reservoir area with less than a 40 percent slope. Common knowledge in the area dictates that recent flooding has disturbed much of the Balm Fork flood plain, and as is also known, an early survey by the Museum of Natural History at the University of Oregon (David Cole 1965) suggested that flooding would have "washed out" any material on the lower flood plain, the most important archaeologically. It is true, also, that observations previous and subsequent to Cole's (Rice 1979; Lothson 1979; Cleveland and Schalk 1980) tend to confirm his initial assessment of the proposed Balm Fork reservoir reach area.

It was for this reason that a disproportionate amount of survey and backhoe testing time was spent in the Willow Creek reach, examining the flood plain here to assess its archaeological potential. It is known from private collectors (Jesse Winchester, Terry Thompson, personal communication) that grinding stones in the form of elongate pestles were found in the Upper Balm Fork, and during our stay in the area, another pestle was reported from a load of angular basalt rubble removed from the talus on

Willow Creek's eastern canyon wall above Terry Thompson's residence (Orville Cutsforth, personal communication). No other finds from the project area were reported to the project archaeologists.

To further evaluate the Willow Creek flood plain, a series of 15 backhoe trenches were excavated in the alfalfa fields and barnyards currently used by Mr. Thompson. His thorough cooperation enabled several to be placed in close proximity to the natural spring in his front yard, a site felt likely to produce some archaeological evidence.

The backhoe was used to excavate 3m x .50m long trenches down to the cobble basement which varied in depth from .20m to 2m or more. Each pass by the backhoe removed approximately 10 centimeters of sediments and each bucket was placed separately. Subsequently, a 5-gallon bucketful of each was screened through 1/4-inch mesh hardware cloth. No artifactual material was recovered.

Flood plain leveling was a common practice during the initial period of European settlement, and the Thompson property along Willow Creek was no exception. The irrigation ditches and scar along the western edge of Thompson's upper alfalfa field are present day artifacts of this process. The attempts to cut down the high areas and fill in the low brought about some transfer of sediments from around the barn area down to the confluence of Balm Fork and Willow Creek (Terry Thompson, personal communication). The catastrophic flooding of 1903 may have necessitated this need as a drop in the flood plain level of Willow Creek can be seen below where Balm Fork enters and is said to have been caused by "the flood." Thus, the two major earthmoving processes on the Willow Creek flood plain of concern here have been flooding and leveling, probably the use of horse or mule teams and fresnos.

Local informants also state that within their lifetime, Native Americans used the road up Balm Fork to gain access to upland root areas (Peter Lennon, personal communication). Apparently, Willow Creek above Balm Fork afforded less access and was used less often. Equestrians are also reported to have used Balm Fork (Rice 1979) as an access route to spring roots, and there is some ethnographic data (Suphan 1974) that places the area within Umatilla and Cayuse home ranges during the Equestrian period. Based on this knowledge and the informant information mentioned above, a more extensive look at the areas' upland might serve to assess their resource value to hunter-gatherers and place the Balm Fork and Willow Creek drainages within a more detailed model of settlement and subsistence.

In conclusion, no prehistoric archaeological remains were encountered during the survey and subsurface explorations carried out within the project area. Historic properties, however, exist within the project area which could possibly be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. The descriptions of these structures in the following section should permit a determination of whether or not these will require additional attention.

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HISTORICAL SURVEY OF WILLOW CREEK LAKE, OREGON

by

Robert K. Sutton

Introduction

This report is divided into three segments: the historical overview; the historical site survey; and recommendations. An on the ground survey was conducted on July 31 and August 4, 1980. Archival research and informant interviews took place on July 30-31 and August 4-6, 1980. The survey utilizes the criteria established for the National Register. which are as follows:

The quality of significance in American history, architecture, archaeology, and culture is present in districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, and:

- A. that are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or
- B. that are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or
- C. that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
- D. that have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Normally, only those properties at least fifty years old are eligible, unless they are of exceptional importance.

The Oregon State Historic Preservation Office was contacted prior to the preparation of this report. There are currently no properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Statewide Inventory

of Historic Sites and Buildings, the Historic American Building Survey (HABS), or the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) within the project area.

I wish to thank the following organizations and persons for their assistance: the Heppner Gazette-Times; the Morrow County Museum; the Morrow County Title Company; the Morrow County Courthouse; Terry Thompson; Peter Lennon; Victor Groshen; James Monahan; Elmer Byland; Alton Osmin; Marshall Lovgren; Ellen Campbell; Edwin Gonty; Harold Beckett; and Justine Weatherford. My special appreciation is extended to Rachel Harnett, Curator of the Morrow County Museum. She provided a wealth of information for this report and graciously opened the files of the museum to me on her day off.

Historical Overview

White settlement in Heppner, Oregon began in the 1860s. The evidence is sketchy for this early period, but the first farmers established themselves along Balm Fork and within the present city boundaries of Heppner. By 1872 approximately 25 people lived in the area referred to as Stansbury Flat. In that same year progress came to the area when J. L. Morrow and Henry Heppner established a mercantile store in the community. Residents from the surrounding region realized the importance of this venture. They gathered in the clearing which would later become the town of Heppner and celebrated with music and dancing (Parsons and Shiach 1902:291-292).

Within a year the somewhat undistinguished name of Stansbury Flat was changed to Heppner in honor of the recently arrived proprietor. Several new businesses came to town in 1873--a blacksmith shop, a drugstore, and other trade, eating, and drinking establishments. Henry Heppner personally

led the fund raising drive for a new school, and the town continued to prosper through the remainder of the decade. By 1880 the population was 318 (French 1971:24-25).

Development of the area within the proposed Willow Creek Lake site coincided closely with that of Heppner. David Anderson was the earliest settler, registering a homestead patent on the southeast quarter of Section 35 in about 1869 (French 1971:24). Ransom Hart came to the area around 1870 and homesteaded and purchased much of the land on the Balm Fork section of the proposed lake. His wife, a daughter, and nearly all of his possessions were lost in the 1903 flood (Gonty 1980; Campbell 1980). James and Nelson Jones settled the land at the confluence of Balm Fork and Willow Creek and eventually owned much of the area within the proposed Willow Creek Lake. Nelson Jones became a prominent citizen in the town of Heppner, contributing generously to the school building fund. James Jones took great pride in his horses and established a racetrack on his property. The track was located approximately beneath the proposed dam. Historical documents do not refer to the racetrack, but tradition and reminiscences frequently refer to this site. The activities were divided between horse racing and riding wild broncos rodeo style. Repeta, a mare in the Jones herd, became famous in the eastern racing circuits (Monahan 1980; Harnett 1980). The track was no longer used in 1900. James Jones and his entire family were killed in the 1903 flood.

In 1900 Heppner boasted a population of about 1,100 people. Agriculture was the primary economic base and wool was the major export--Heppner ranked second in the state of Oregon in this product. The town became the county seat for Morrow County in 1886, and a new, elegant courthouse was completed in 1902, using native blue basalt quarried from

Balm Fork (about one mile beyond the end of the proposed lake) for much of the stone work (Weatherford 1980). Other substantial buildings were constructed at the same time. The IOOF and the "Rock" building (presently Murray Drug Store) were constructed with native basalt. An opera hall and brewery contributed to the pleasures of the community, and prominent citizens constructed houses rivaling the elegance of anything in Eastern Oregon.

In about 1875 a grist mill was constructed to grind the local wheat and corn. The owner was a man by the name of Beagle who borrowed funds from the community to construct the mill. Water to power the mill was probably diverted from Hinton Creek at the beginning, but later a dam on Willow Creek routed water along a mile long mill race and into the mill. The dam is visible about $\frac{3}{8}$ of a mile above the proposed dam site, as well as portions of the mill race. Several subsequent owners improved the mill's power system and in 1887, J. B. Sperry completely rebuilt the mill at a cost of \$32,000. In 1891 a local joint stock company purchased the mill and it continued to operate into the 1920s (Parson and Shiach 1902:293, 298; Groshen 1980).

Headlines in the June 16, 1903 Portland Oregonian read as follows:

The news columns of the Oregonian, presenting a record of events of the Pacific Northwest for more than one half of a century, have never chronicled a more terrible tale of disaster to our own people than that which is now coming in from the ruined and desolate remnant of the pretty and prosperous City of Heppner
The disastrous flood is without an equal in the Pacific Northwest.

The emotional language of the article did not exaggerate the impact of the flood. It was one of the major natural disasters in American history. Heppner's population at the time was 1142, and of that number 247¹ were killed. At families lost one or two members, and several were completely wiped out.

Late in the afternoon of June 14, 1903 a dark cloud appeared south of town and rain began to fall. At first everyone was pleased to see the rainfall, recognizing the benefit to the crops. The thunder, hail, and heavy rainfall accompanying the storm muffled the noise of the wall of water raging down Balm Fork. The torrent hit Heppner with no warning. When the flood reached Heppner, the first structure in its path was a laundry building owned by Fred Drug, a German emigrant. The building straddled Willow Creek and held the water for a moment allowing it to back up. When the laundry gave way, the flood crushed nearly everything in its path (Harnett 1980; French 1971:61). Elmer Byland, a lifelong resident of Heppner, was only a small boy when the flood hit, but he recalls the tremendous devastation. People were screaming and the sound of buildings crashing against each other was almost deafening (Byland 1980). When the water finally subsided, 140 houses and 40 businesses were destroyed (Oregonian, June 16, 17, 18, 1903; June 14, 1949; June 14, 1953; Heppner Gazette-Times, June 18, 1903). A walk through the Heppner cemetery today gives one an idea of the devastation.

As in most natural disasters there were heroes who pulled people from the swirling water, but the most enduring bravery was the famous ride of Lesley Matlock and Bruce Kelly. These young men realized that the flood would carry much of its force to the towns of Lexington and Ione, further downstream. They saddled two horses, broke into the hardware store for a pair of wire cutters and headed across country warning all the farmers along the way. They reached Lexington just as the water hit town. Residents had already fled into the hills. Matlock's horse gave out, he saddled a fresh mount and both men headed for Ione. They beat the flood by a couple of minutes and assisted the people in reaching

safety. Matlock and Kelly were local heroes for the remainder of their lives. It was easy to equate their heroism with the ride of Paul Revere (Oregonian, June 16, 1903; June 14, 1953; Heppner Gazette-Times, June 18, 1903; Pendleton East Oregonian, June 15, 1903)

When word of the devastation reached the country, many communities responded with immediate aid. Pendleton and many Oregon towns donated the money budgeted for 4th of July celebrations. Portland sent 102 paid workers to help in the clean-up effort. Donations totaling over \$60,000 came in from all over the country (Oregonian, September 3, 1903; French 1971:64-65). Heppner was eventually rebuilt, but the town was not spared from future floods.

The narrow valley in which Heppner is located appears to be an idyllic setting for a town, but four streams join within a mile of each other and since the 1903 flood, all of these creeks have inundated sections of the city. In 1934, Balm Fork and Willow Creek flooded the town and caused an estimated \$100,000 damage (Heppner Gazette-Times, May 5, 1934). A 1943 cloudburst hit the city and caused some minor damage. An early spring freshet in 1949 flooded Willow Creek and Hinton Creek and did extensive damage to the county fairgrounds (Heppner Gazette-Times, March 3, 1949). Willow Creek overflowed its banks in 1957 and although Heppner was not damaged, many low-lying fields were destroyed (Heppner Gazette-Times, October 8, 1957).

More recently, Shobe Creek (approximately 1/4 mile downstream from the proposed dam) has been the culprit. On June 9, 1969 this stream overflowed its banks and caused extensive property damage. After this flood, the editor of the Heppner Gazette-Times commented:

Should the Willow Creek dam above Heppner reach culmination, Lexington and Ione may reach some benefits from impounding

the creek water, but from last week's storm it is obvious that this alone would not prevent all flood threats to the towns below, because they are vulnerable from the canyons of the hillsides surrounding them (June 12, 1969).

On May 25, 1971 Shobe Creek flooded Heppner again. This time the city swimming pool was nearly destroyed and fifty houses were damaged (East Oregonian, May 26, 27, 1971).

Site Inventory

The historical survey was conducted on July 31 and August 4, 1980. Sites were documented by archival research at the Morrow County Museum, the offices of the Heppner Gazette-Times, the Morrow County Courthouse, and the Morrow County Title Company. Further documentation was obtained from interviews with informants familiar with the area. During this work, an effort was made to find information on potential prehistoric or historic archaeological sites. This data was provided to the archaeological team.

James Jones Racing Track (NW 1/4, SE 1/4, S 35, T 2S, R 26E)

Precise documentary evidence on the location of this racetrack is elusive. From the accounts of informants, it appears that the site was underneath the proposed Willow Creek Dam. It was used from the late 1870s until about 1895 and was a popular attraction for the cowboys in the surrounding area. There were races on the track, with the young men riding their finest mounts. Other accounts indicate that wild horses were brought from the mountains for rodeo style "bronc-busting." All remnants of the racetrack were washed away in the 1903 flood (Byland 1980; Monahan 1980; Harnett 1980). Since the racetrack is no longer visible, this site probably would not be considered eligible for the National Register.

Ice Dam (SW 1/4, SE 1/4, S 35, T 2S, R 26E)

This dam was constructed on Willow Creek in about 1900 to divert water into a small nearby pond to make ice during the winter. The owner, Jim Cowins, stored the cut ice in sawdust and sold it to local residents during the summer. The ice was also used for cold storage at the local creamery (Groshen 1980; Monahan 1980). The concrete walls and the dam itself are presently visible (see Figure 1). Since this is a unique site in the local area, a determination should be made whether or not it is eligible for the National Register.

Sheep Shed (SW 1/4, SE 1/4, S 35, T 2S, R 26E)

In 1916 Frank Monahan purchased the farm presently owned by Terry Thompson and started raising sheep (the previous owner, Mr. Byland, raised cattle and horses). As part of the operation, he built two large sheep sheds on the property and both are still standing. The shed to the northwest (see Figure 2) was constructed in 1925 and is significant for its construction technique. The interesting feature is the black pine timber framing (see Figure 3). The straight lines in the timber and the hand-hewn joints are extremely well executed, and the barn is in excellent condition. The present owner recently covered the shed with metal roofing, but the remainder of the structure is original (Thompson 1980; Monahan 1980; Osmin 1980). It was not ascertained whether or not this structure is unique to the local area, but it is a fine example of this type of barn. A determination of eligibility for the National Register should be made on this structure.

Mill Race Dam (SE 1/4, SE 1/4, S 35, T 2S, R 26E)

The Heppner gristmill was first constructed in about 1875 using an overshot waterwheel for power. This early structure was located near



Fig. 1. Portion of an Ice Dam Built on Willow Creek Around 1900

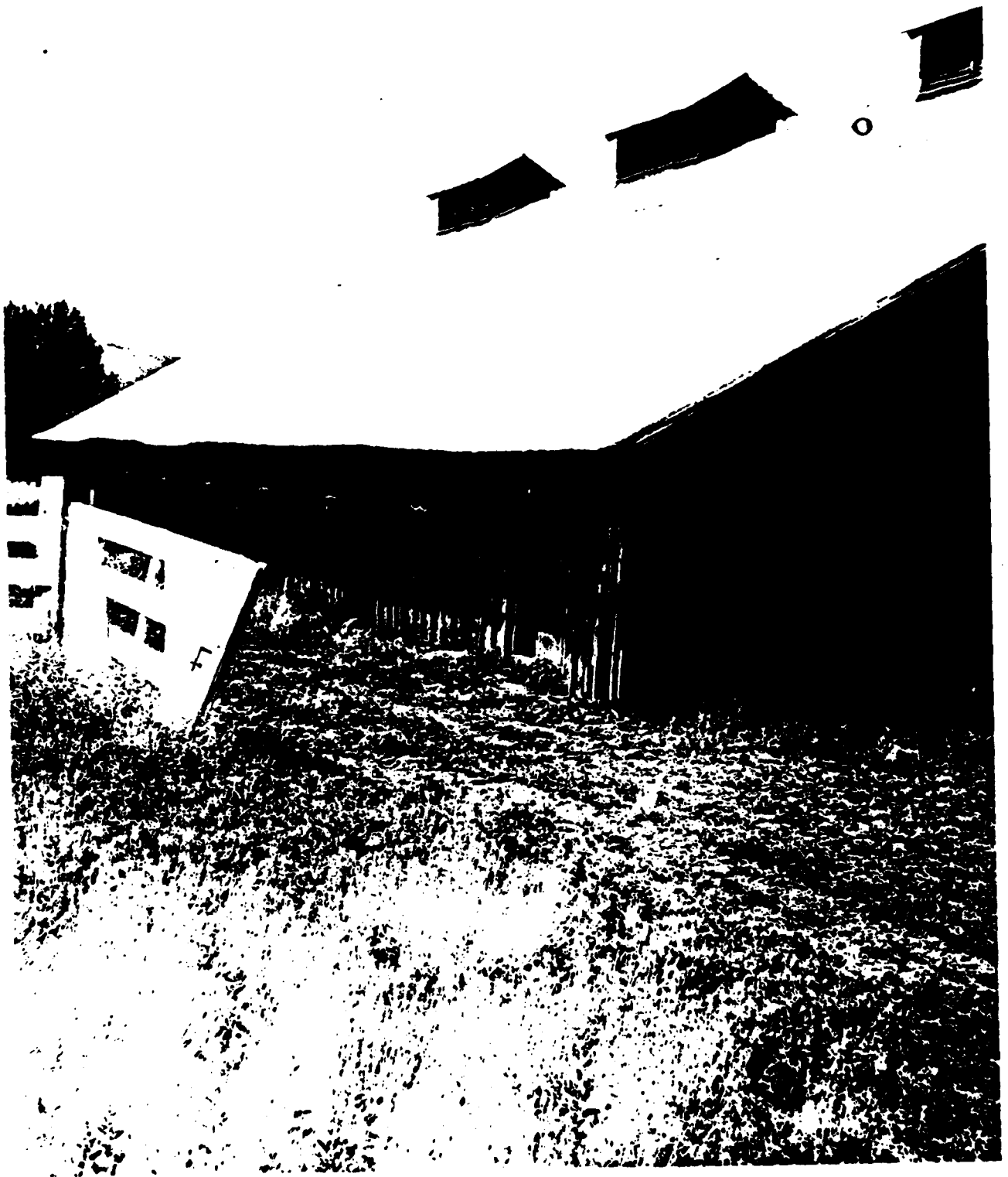


Fig. 2. Sheep Shed on the Ranch of Terry Thompson



Fig. 3. Black Pine Timber Framing of Sheep Shed Owned by Terry Thompson

the present Heppner Pioneer Hospital and the water source may have been Hinton Creek. In 1878 a turbine wheel replaced the original inefficient system and it is possible that water was diverted from Willow Creek at this time. The mill was completely rebuilt in 1887 with modern machinery. A photograph taken in the 1890s clearly shows the mill race extending from Willow Creek to the gristmill.

The diversion dam was located approximately $\frac{3}{8}$ of a mile above the proposed Willow Creek damsite and the mill race extended for a mile around the hill and into the mill (Parsons and Shiach 1902:293, 298). Elmer Byland states that the dam was rebuilt in about 1910 (Byland 1980). The mill ceased operations in the 1920s (Groshen 1980). The concrete portions of the dam and sections of the mill race are presently visible. Since the mill building is no longer standing, it is doubtful whether the dam and mill race by themselves are eligible for the National Register.

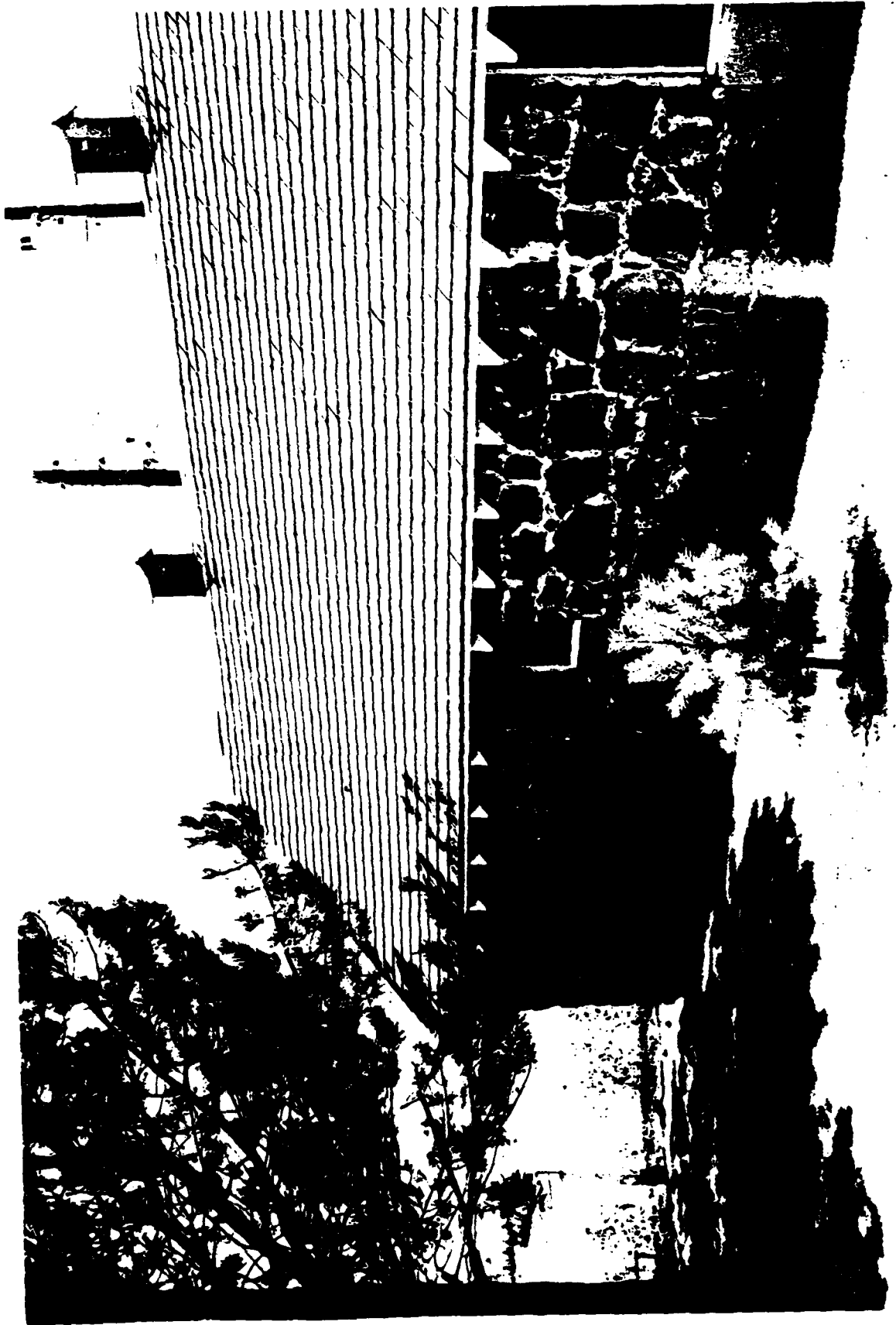
Bunkhouse (SE 1/4, SE 1/4, S 35, T 2S, R 26E)

Originally this house sat on a small shelf at the confluence of Balm Fork and Willow Creek. John Cason built the house around 1890 and it was high enough to survive the 1903 flood. In about 1920 the house was moved to a location near the mill race dam, then more recently it was moved again about 200 feet southwest of the Terry Thompson house. After the second move, the house was altered to make it into a bunkhouse (Monahan 1980; Byland 1980; Osmin 1980). The modifications and the two moves suggest that this building is not eligible for the National Register.

Stone Cellar (SE 1/4, SE 1/4, S 35, T 2S, R 26E)

The stone cellar directly behind the Terry Thompson house appears to be unique to the local area and possibly to the state of Oregon, and it meets several criteria for the National Register. This cellar is shown in Figure 4. It was constructed in 1920 by Victor A Groshen, a local stonemason who emigrated to the area from Alsace-Lorraine. Mr. Groshen helped construct the Morrow County Courthouse and the "Stone" building (presently Murphy Drug Store) both in Heppner. He was trained in old world stone cutting techniques, and he used this knowledge to construct the cellar. The blue basalt stone was quarried from the hill across the highway from the Terry Thompson house. While Groshen was cutting the rock from the hill he noticed a moonshiner caching a large jug nearby. He went to the Frank Monahan house, found a siphon hose and a one gallon jug, emptied some of the hidden liquid, then he and Frank Monahan proceeded to get "rip-roaring" drunk (Monahan 1980; Groshen 1980).

The cellar is approximately 35 feet long by 18 feet wide, and the walls are 3 feet thick. It is covered with a simple wood framed and shingled gable roof. There is an enclosed wood framed entry porch on the north side. The rock work consists of rough, unfinished cut basalt placed randomly with a lime base mortar. The attic floor is covered with approximately 6 inches of sawdust, and the natural insulation of this material and the rock walls keeps the cellar at a constant temperature all year long. The structure has not been altered since its construction. The only change is a recent re-roofing, replacing the original wood shingles with identical material (Monahan 1980; Groshen 1980; Thompson 1980). This is the only structure of its kind in the area, and it is possibly the only such building in the state of Oregon. The significance is further



enhanced when considered as the work of an old world craftsman and in relationship to the other stone buildings in Heppner. These factors strongly suggest that the stone cellar is eligible for the National Register.

Peter Lennon House and Outbuildings (NE 1/4, NW 1/4, S 2, T 3S, R 26E)

The devastation of the 1903 flood is evident as one studies the farms and houses on Balm Fork. The Peter Lennon farm was originally owned by Ransom Hart. Every building and Mr. Hart's wife and daughter were washed away in the flood. It is difficult to precisely date the construction of the present house, barn, and shed, but they were probably constructed in 1905. The house and an outbuilding are illustrated in Figures 5, 6, and 7. Although these buildings meet the fifty year criterion for the National Register, they are not significant to the area for design or construction. Figure 8 shows locations of these and above-mentioned structures.

Recommendations

The area to be inundated by the proposed Willow Creek Lake is associated with the historical development of the City of Heppner. Some of the earliest residents homesteaded the area, and the agricultural economy was and is based on the products and livestock raised on the land.

There is a strong likelihood that the Stone Cellar is eligible for the National Register. The Ice Dam, Sheep Shed, and Mill Race Dam may qualify as well. This report should be submitted to the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office for its consideration and comment.

NOTES

1. Accounts of the death toll range from 225 to 251. The number most commonly cited is 247.

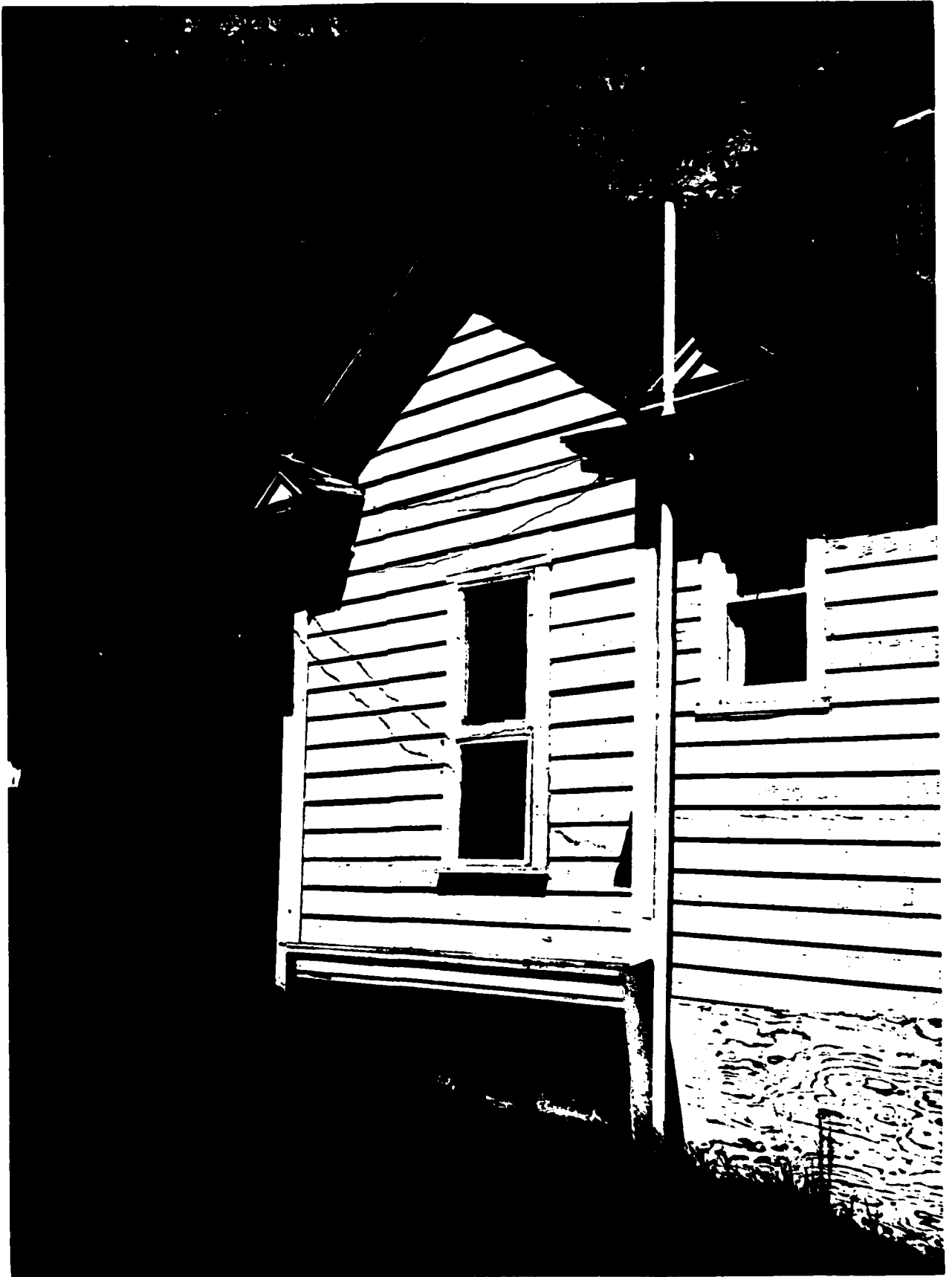


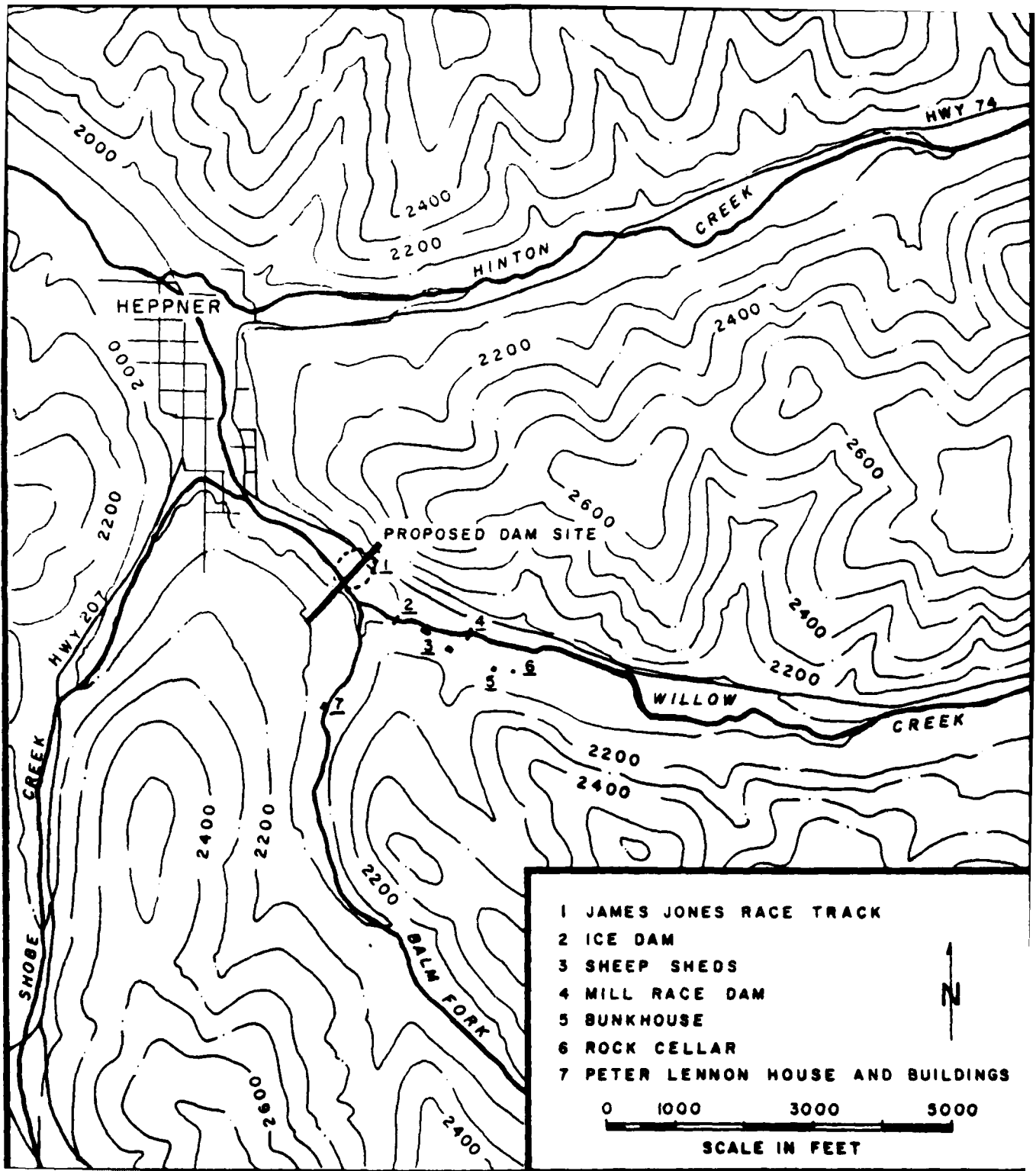
Fig. 5. Peter Lennon House



Fig. 6. Peter Lennon House



Fig. 7. Outbuilding of the Peter Lennon Place



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